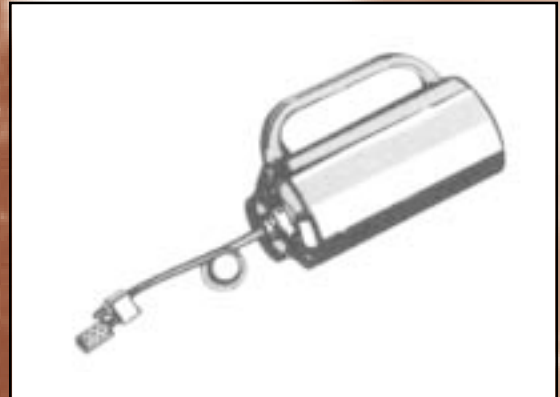


# Communicator's Guide Wildland Fire



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## Introduction and Organization of *Guide*

“Lighting Strikes Ignite Twenty New Fires in Florida Today” reads the newspaper headlines. A temporary sign posted on the roadside in a national park reads “Prescribed Burn In Progress”; in the background smoke is twisting skyward. What images do the viewers retain? Fire? Danger? Loss of life and property? Do the images reflect reality?

Most days, somewhere in the United States, a wildland fire is burning. In the absence of a full understanding of wildland fire, people may naturally create their own perceptions and opinions about the topic, as might be expected.

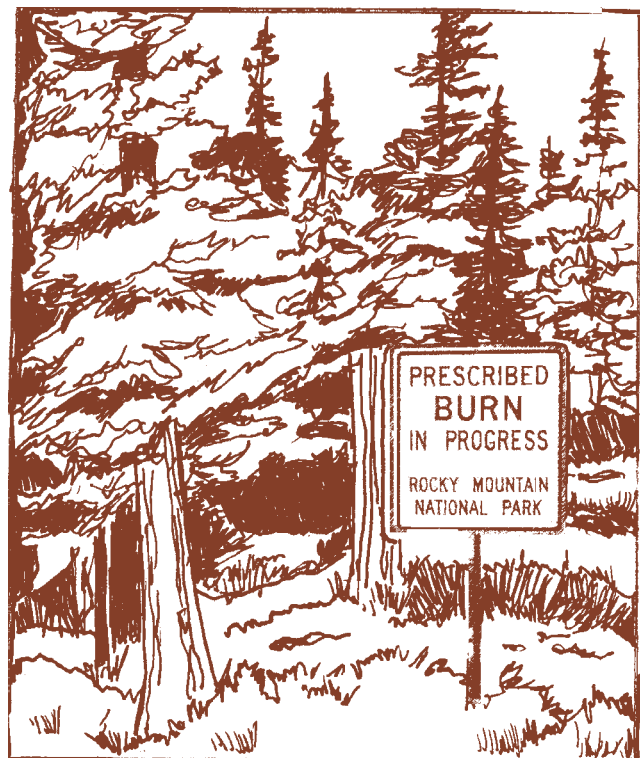
At issue though is that these perceptions, often misperceptions, can become inculcated into society to form “public opinion.” That public opinion influences laws and policies related to wildland fire management.

Land managers, whether federal, state, local, tribal, nongovernment, or private, must face the dilemma of “to burn or not to burn” in the context of public opinion, laws, and policies. If regularly prescribed fires or other fuel load reduction methods are not utilized in some fire dependent communities we run the risk of extreme fire and/or natural biotic processes being hindered. When managers do burn there are numerous issues, not the least of which is that publics may be uninformed or misinformed about the ecological issues and risks associated with prescribed fire.

In the face of these countervailing forces of the need to burn versus a tendency in society to see “fire as a menacing force,” agencies and organizations must be proactive. Just as fire ecology and fire management sciences are making great strides in research and practice so must the human dimension sciences associated with wildland fire be bolstered. One aspect of the human dimensions side of the equation is associated with risk communications of wildland fire.

Historically, fire messages were packaged as only prevention messages with various icons. More recently prescribed fire messages have focused only on fuel load reduction often ignoring that in some situations it is the stimulation of biotic processes that is the most important rationale for fire. Beginning with the Yellowstone fires of 1988, wildland fire messages began to be framed in a more proactive science and management context. People began seeing the critical resource issues associated with wildland fire on television, in their parks and forest interpretive programs, and in newspapers.

Land management practitioners and society as a whole must continue to make a concerted effort to inform and engage people, especially in human communities embedded in fire dependent natural communities. Without this engagement and public participation, land managers will be continually forced to deal with not only wildland fire but complications that arise out of society’s lack of understanding and support for wildland fire management practices and policies.



Who says what to whom, when, where, and why are key points in affecting communications. This *Communicator's Guide* is designed to aid in that communication effort. Found within are background information, ideas, sample materials, and sources for further information. Not found within are prescriptions to success, the most successful how-to techniques, or definitive research studies on wildland fire communications. It should be noted that each section was written as to stand on its own, ready to be extracted and used as a handout.

Each communicator, both the formally designated, professionally trained communicator, and weary firefighters with microphones in their faces, has a story to tell. Teachers, science reporters for the media, community leaders, and the opinion leader of informal community networks are all communicators who can affect attitudes, perceptions, and a willingness among communities to listen, participate, and work with wildland fire in their community and greater ecosystem to foster sustainability.

Following is an overview of the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) and National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG). The central messages of NWCG are presented. The messages, combined with your own experience and further research, should help you to better frame the story you wish to share, the themes/storylines to be used, and what you wish to accomplish (objectives).

A section on the scientific aspects is added as background information in a very concise format. The science of wildland fire and a brief overview of wildland fire in seven select ecosystems is shared. Using this information, your existing knowledge, and the science of wildland fire in your particular area, meaningful messages can be crafted.

Crafting messages must include human dimensions issues. Thus, a Social Aspects of Wildland Fire Section is shared.

Since many of the users of this *Guide* are part of organizations/agencies who have policies guiding their roles in wildland fire, a policy section is included. Here you will find a discussion of U.S. federal wildland fire policy, ecosystem approach to management, and institutional factors. Federal, state, local, tribal, nonprofit, and private organizations are all part of the evolution of wildland fire policies.

Fostering communication with various audiences, found in the next two sections, is the crux of this *Guide*. The thesis here is that communications are planned and are much more than random sharing of messages.

Since this document is only a beginning, resources to aid you in your wildland fire communication efforts are included in the form of abstracted case studies, internet information, and a resource bibliography. The case studies are used for illustrative purposes with the idea that you will build a case study for your area/project. Internet information is offered not as a definitive source but as a starting point. Over time web pages grow, shrink, become dated, and may occasionally carry inaccurate data. Thus, as any communicator/reporter should do, verify sources and data with other authoritative sources before dissemination.

The ringed binder notebook format provides you, the manager, ranger, teacher, firefighter, elected official, public affairs officer, interpreter — whatever your role as a communicator — an option to add your own materials and notes to this document.

Just as each fire takes on characteristics of its own, a well-planned communications program will be unique in that your messages are specifically linked to your ecosystem, local communities, agency/organization's mission, methods and media used, and your credibility as the message originator.

## The National Interagency Fire Center and the National Wildfire Coordinating Group

The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) is a resource to be interpreted as a subtheme when we explain the role of the government in wildland fire management. Without a clear rudimentary understanding of national fire management and coordination, society may feel unduly at risk. NIFC and the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) provide for our nation's comprehensive wildland fire management.

NIFC, located in Boise, Idaho, is the nation's management and logistical support center for wildland fire. NIFC coordinates and supports operations for managing wildland fire and other natural disasters throughout the United States. The fire center is also active in fuel load management and public education/outreach. The fire center is located on a 55-acre site administered by the Bureau of Land Management. Operating costs and responsibilities are shared by the cooperating agencies.

Wildland fire does not respect jurisdictional boundaries. No single federal, state, local, tribal, or volunteer agency alone can handle all wildland fire that may occur in its jurisdiction. These groups work together to exchange support, protection responsibilities, information, and training, to protect lives, property, and natural resources.

NIFC provides valuable coordination and support for these cooperative firefighting efforts. It also provides assistance and support for other natural disasters at the request of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). In addition, the fire center provides support to Canada through a mutual aid agreement and to other foreign countries through the U.S. Department of State, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance.

NIFC provides:

- aerial imagery
- airtanker base
- equipment and supply cache
- equipment development
- infrared mapping
- national contracting
- national fire information/news
- national policy and guidelines
- telecommunications
- remote automatic weather stations
- research and education
- smokejumper base
- technical and scientific expertise
- training and consultation
- transport aircraft for crews and equipment

NIFC also facilitates the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) that is tasked to quickly locate and mobilize emergency personnel, equipment, supplies, and aircraft nationwide.

The Multi-Agency Coordination (MAC) group is another program facilitated by NIFC. When the national fire situation becomes severe, the MAC group is activated to identify national or interagency issues, and to set priorities for allocation of resources. This coordination group consists of the NIFC directors and, when appropriate, a representative from the General Services Administration (GSA), a military liaison, and/or state foresters.

Responsibilities for mobilizing to address fire are at these levels — local, geographic area, and national. At the local level, wildland fire is initially managed by the local agency that has fire protection responsibility for that area. Engines, ground crews, smokejumpers, helicopter firefighters (landing or repelling), helicopters with water buckets, and airtankers carrying retardant may all be used for initial suppression. Various local agencies may work together, sharing personnel and equipment, to fight new fire(s) and those that escape initial action.

If a wildland fire grows to the point where local personnel and equipment are not enough to fight it, the responsible agency contacts the nearest Geographic Area Coordination Center (GACC) for help. The GACC will locate and dispatch additional firefighters and support personnel, including incident management teams, engines, bulldozers, other aircraft, and supplies throughout the geographic area. The GACC can also contract for private goods and services if government support is not available.

During busy fire seasons, fighting wildland fires may exhaust the supply of state, local, and geographic area personnel and equipment. In these cases the GACC contacts the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) at NIFC and relays requests from the fire. NIFC locates and mobilizes the closest available resources, wherever they are, throughout the nation.

NIFC partners are: **1) Bureau of Land Management (BLM)**, U.S. Department of the Interior—BLM manages 264 million acres of public lands, provides fire protection for 388 million acres, and is the host agency at NIFC. BLM's National Office of Fire and Aviation is headquartered at NIFC. **2) U.S. Forest Service (USFS)**, U.S. Department of Agriculture—USFS manages 191 million acres of national forests and grasslands. State wildland fire organizations are represented at NIFC through the U.S. Forest Service's Cooperative State and Private Forest authorities. **3) Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)**, U.S. Department of the Interior—FWS manages more than 92 million acres of national wildlife refuge and wetland areas. The FWS National Division of Refuges, Fire Management Branch, is headquartered at NIFC. **4) National Park Service (NPS)**, U.S. Department of the Interior—NPS administers 80 million acres of national parks, monuments, historic sites, natural areas, and other federal lands. Its national Branch of Fire and Aviation is located at NIFC. **5) Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)**, U.S. Department of Interior—BIA

provides wildland fire protection for 60 million acres of Indian reservations and other trust lands. BIA's National Wildland Fire and Aviation staff is headquartered at NIFC. **6) National Weather Service (NWS)**, U.S. Department of Commerce—NWS provides vital weather analysis, forecasts, and training to all fire management agencies. During fire seasons, NWS provides daily weather briefings to NIFC. **7) Office of Aircraft Services (OAS)**, U.S. Department of the Interior—OAS provides aircraft, and technical and administrative aviation services to governmental organizations. OAS, part of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, is located at NIFC. Joining with the aforementioned group is the National Association of State Foresters. It is through this group that individual states participate. Representatives from each of the groups comprise the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCWG).

The purpose of the NWCWG is to establish an operational group designed to coordinate programs of the participating management agencies so as to avoid wasteful duplication of resources and to provide a means of constructively working together. Its goal is to provide more effective execution of each agency's fire management program. The group provides a formalized system to agree upon standards of training, equipment, qualifications, aircraft, suppression priorities, and other operational functions. Agreed upon policies, standards, and procedures are implemented directly through regular agency channels.

Communicators are urged not to overlook the institutional framework. The institutional arrangements, and subsequent policies and practices, provide a story within itself that society has paid for and should hear.

## References

NIFC; 3833 Development Ave.; Boise, ID 83705.  
(208) 387-5512; <http://www.nifc.gov/>

## Managing Wildland Fire: Balancing America's Natural Heritage and the Public Interest

The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) has developed the following consistent fire role and use message to provide a framework for targeting messages to audiences across the nation.

Fire is an important and inevitable part of America's wildlands. It is now widely recognized that we must restore fire to many areas from which it has been excluded. Wildland fires can produce both benefits and damages—to the natural environment and to human constructed environments. By working together, we can maximize the benefits of wildland fire and minimize the damages, including threats to public health. Five central messages are recommended for inclusion in all wildland fire programs:

1. Wildland fire management, which includes the prevention, control, and use of wildland fire is a process affecting us all.
  - Prevention is education and other actions that reduce unwanted wildland fires.
  - Control is action taken on unwanted wildland fires to protect life, and to reduce damage to resources and property.
  - Use is the application of wildland fire to meet specific objectives.
2. Wildlands are always changing, sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtly. Fire is one of the important natural agents of change.
  - Fire has helped shape many of North America's wildlands for thousands of years and is essential for the survival of many plants and animals.
  - Historic patterns of wildland fire varied from one place to another, depending largely on climate, type of vegetation, and human influence.
  - Present fire patterns now differ substantially from historic fire patterns due to changing human influence.
  - The effects of fire range from subtle to extreme and are influenced by the condition of the vegetation when fire occurs.
3. We have learned that the lack of periodic fire in many wildlands increases risks to society and the environment. Risks vary from one location to another and may include:
  - land damaging fire resulting from fuel accumulations above historic levels;
  - loss of life or serious injury to firefighters and the public;
  - health effects and visibility impairment from intense or extended periods of smoke;
  - escalating costs of controlling unwanted wildland fires;
  - property loss and damage to economically valuable landscapes;



- loss of plant and animal species and their habitats; and
  - damage to soil, watersheds, and water quality.
4. As partners in wildland fire management, we can all take steps to reduce risks. Many risks can be reduced through the increased use of fire in wildlands. To increase our use of fire successfully, all of us need to:
- become better informed about the prevention, control, and use of fire;
  - become better informed about the beneficial effects of fire;
  - participate in planning and preparing for wildland fire;
  - accept the necessary trade-off between manageable smoke impacts from planned wildland fire and the more severe impact of smoke from unwanted fire; and
  - create incentives for building and maintaining fire-safe homes and communities to reduce the unwanted consequences of wildland fire.
5. Effective use of wildland fire will provide substantial benefits to society and the environment. These benefits include:
- increased safety for wildland firefighters and the public;
  - reduced effects of smoke on public health and visibility;
  - minimized damage from wildland fire;
  - reduced costs of wildland fire management;
  - protection of plants and animals that depend on fire; and
  - improved habitats and watersheds.

The adoption and inclusion of the messages at the national, geographic, and local levels holds great promise for expanding the understanding of, appreciation for, and ultimately adoption of wildland fire management practices.

